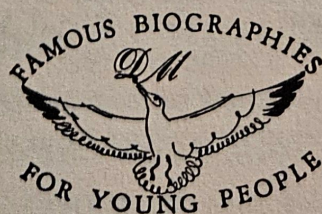


FAMOUS BLACK ENTERTAINERS OF TODAY

by Raoul Abdul

ILLUSTRATED WITH PHOTOGRAPHS



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MELVIN VAN PEEBLES

Writer - Composer - Filmmaker

IT IS HARD to label Chicago-born Melvin Van Peebles. Besides being a composer, filmmaker, playwright, producer, and director, he is also a novelist writing in both French and English. He first came to national attention with his motion picture *The Story of a Three-Day Pass*, which was called the first feature-length film to be directed by a black American released through commercial channels. This was followed by *Watermelon Man* and the spectacular box-office hit *Sweet Sweetback* and *Don't Play Us Cheap*. On Broadway, he stirred up a great deal of controversy with his plays *Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death* and *Don't Play Us Cheap* (stage version).

Born on the South side of Chicago, Van Peebles grew up in Phoenix, Illinois, where he attended Thornton Township High School. He has told the press of his youth: "I must have been a little strange even as a kid, with my nose stuck in a book all the time." He had a reputation for reading many books and he used to get beat up frequently for not belonging to the neighborhood gang.

He furthered his education at West Virginia State College and, after the first years, he transferred to Ohio Wesleyan, from which he was graduated in 1953 with a B.A. in English Literature. After three and a half years in

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the Air Force, he tried painting in Mexico, then moved to San Francisco.

In San Francisco, Van Peebles earned his living by working as a grip man on a cable car. This inspired him to write the text for a picture book entitled *The Big Heart*, which was published in 1957. In it, he said, "I like being a grip man. Sometimes as the cable car goes by I see my reflection in a store window and I fool myself and tell myself I'm not really me, but a ghost from the past." For some reason he was fired by the company in spite of the fact that he had never been late or absent from the job. When he went to the FEPC to protest his being fired, they asked him if anyone had called him a "nigger." Since the answer was negative, they asked him how he could call it discrimination, and the matter was dropped.

After unsuccessful attempts to break into the film industry in Hollywood, where the only job he could get was sweeping floors, he packed up his household (which included a wife and children) and moved to Europe. With his GI Bill, he studied astronomy in the Netherlands and managed to get a role in the Dutch National Theatre's production of Brendan Behan's *The Hostage*.

He moved on to Paris, where he supported himself by singing and dancing outside of theatres and writing for French periodicals. In spite of the fact that he was constantly moving in and out of various apartments, Van Peebles managed to write and publish five novels. Only *A Bear for the F.B.I.* was written in English, after which he was able to write directly into French without the aid of a translator. His other books include *The Chinaman of the 14th District*, *The True American*, *The Party in Harlem*, and *La Permission*.

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His novel *La Permission* became the basis for the screenplay for his film *The Story of a Three-Day Pass*. It was this script which served as the proper credential to qualify him to take the examination for directors at the French Film Center to make him eligible for a \$60,000 subsidy for films that are "artistically valuable, but not necessarily commercially viable."

He was lucky enough to find a small producing company, O.P.E.R.A., to produce it. Van Peebles recalls, "I actually shot the film in six weeks for \$200,000. That's nothing for a movie. When I'm filming, I'm alone. I run a tight ship. I tell them what I want and say, 'Give me that; do what you got to do first and talk to me about it later.' I ran the cutting room, I ran the music, I ran the thing. That can't be done in the American system."

At a party in Paris, Van Peebles got caught in a conversation with another black American, Albert Johnson, who, it turned out, was a program director for the San Francisco International Film Festival. They got their heads together and the end result was an invitation for Van Peebles to show *The Story of a Three-Day Pass* as the French entry at the festival in 1967.

Because of its success in San Francisco, the film was brought into New York the following July and was most enthusiastically received by *Saturday Review's* erudite critic, Hollis Alpert. He wrote that it was "so pleasantly and sincerely made, so filled with delightful touches of humour, and for a first effort, so surprisingly adept technically." *The Village Voice* added, "Peebles shows talent and intelligence above and beyond the demands of tokenism."

In an interview with Judy Stone in *The New York Times*,

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Van Peebles said, "There is a certain awareness I must have, being a Negro director, but even if I'm intrigued by a Negro subject, I won't do that for my next film. I don't want to get typecast like Negro writers are typecast."

But the big Hollywood studio Columbia Pictures beckoned, and Van Peebles signed a contract to do *Watermelon Man* (1970), a satire about a white bigot who turns black. The studio had the preconceived notion to cast a white actor in the role, but Van Peebles fought with them relentlessly until they finally gave the part to Godfrey Cambridge. After the film got the Van Peebles treatment, the producer protested that he had filmed it from a *black* point of view! In its review of the film, *The New York Times* wrote, "Saddest of all, and 'Watermelon Man' is a sad occasion, is the waste of an able new director, Melvin Van Peebles."

To avoid falling into the trap of the Hollywood syndrome again, Van Peebles decided that his next film venture would be independent. He said that one morning he looked in the mirror and said, "You think you're a studio. Therefore, you *are* a studio." Beginning with the \$70,000 he had earned on *Watermelon Man*, he set about the enormous task of borrowing the rest of the money he needed to start *Sweet Sweetback*. The story of the actual filming was so dramatic that Van Peebles has published a vivid account in a book entitled *The Making of Sweet Sweetback's Baad- asssss Song*. Of the book the *Chicago Tribune* said, "Something new and something very good from story conception to theatre exhibition. A saga with enough technical information to fascinate the most educated in film production."

When *Sweetback* opened at the Grand Circus Theatre in Detroit on March 31, 1971, it set an all-time house record

and grossed \$45,534 within five days. Following another smashing success in Atlanta, it was brought into New York where it was greeted by an unfavorable review by Roger Greenspun in *The New York Times*. Said he: "I think that Melvin Van Peebles has the talent, the intelligence and even the instincts of a good filmmaker—despite a growing body of evidence to the contrary. The latest exhibit, 'Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song, Van Peebles' third and worst feature, opened yesterday at the Art and Cinerama theaters, and at the Loew's Victoria."

On its Sunday feature pages, *The New York Times* simultaneously printed essays on the film by the white critic Vincent Canby and the black critic Clayton Riley. Canby concluded, "It may be—as some of its supporters claim—the Black Experience in America, distilled to its essence. My feeling, distilled to its essence, is that that experience deserves a better film." Riley commented, ". . . bearing witness to his film is like staring at a Black key sliding through the cosmos, turning sturdy locks and letting out weird figurines to scatter among us."

Throughout the nation in both black and white press, controversies began to rage about the values of the film, and this caused the public to rush to the nearest box office to see what the fuss was all about. According to Van Peebles, the film, which cost only \$500,000 to make, grossed around ten million dollars. Says he, "It made five million before three white people had seen it. The real message of 'Sweetback' is that we have the key to our own box office. It's the black dollars, the disenfranchised dollars, that go to see those products."

Van Peebles' next venture was his Broadway production,

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Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death, which opened in the fall of 1971 with a reported advance sale of nine dollars. It was a sort of panorama of life in the black ghetto ungarished, really "like it is." There were a series of striking vignettes of the lives of individual characters which anyone who has lived in such an area might recognize all too painfully. At its climax, the author parades these characters around a maypole as if to fix them permanently in our imagination. While this is going on, an old woman comes forward and lays a curse on the audience.

Veteran critic of *The New York Times* Clive Barnes said, "Whites can only treat *Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death* as a journey to a foreign country, and on those terms I think it has the power to shock and excite. . . . Passion—sometimes clumsy, sometimes mawkish, sometimes violent—but passion is what Melvin Van Peebles' play is all about. It held me and it pained me. I can forgive its faults, if it can forgive mine."

Because of the highly competitive nature of the commercial theatre, nothing less than solid rave notices can lure regular theatergoers from their comfortable homes in Westchester and other suburbs into the jungle which Broadway has become. Knowing this, Van Peebles began an intensive public relations campaign into the very ghettos about which his play was concerned and eventually lured enough people into the theatre to keep his work alive. The author told one reporter, "Forty percent of the people who come to my work have never been in the theatre before."

Once Van Peebles was assured that an audience was building for his work, he brought to Broadway still an-

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other show in May of 1972 under the title *Don't Play Us Cheap*. The story concerned itself with two demons—a cockroach and a rat—who decide to invade a Saturday night party in Harlem and try to undermine the fun. According to the *Amsterdam News* critic, Lee Cook, "Broadway shook and trembled as the social truth, the knife-like joyous realism of perhaps Black America's premiere artist-playwright extraordinaire, tapped the pulse of an audience which became drunk and delirious with the enthusiasm of its own self-awareness."

Despite herculean public relations efforts, neither of Van Peebles' stage works managed to become a box-office success. More important, however, is that he brought to the stage images with which the black community can immediately identify. He has also given jobs to many talented blacks in all areas of theatrical endeavor from performing to managing. And he has begun to tap a new audience for legitimate theatre which might someday be the shot in the arm that a very sick Broadway needs to revitalize itself.

As to his future plans, Van Peebles is reluctant to commit himself. He once told a reporter, "I can't say because I don't want to intimidate me. There are so many things I'd like to do. Working on a product from one end to another takes about a year every time. After each one of these things, there's a big council meeting inside my head. The council is convening these days. Everyone is screaming, 'Me next!'"